

Sound Reasoning?
Conceptualizations of Aural Documents and their
Relation to Reality in Ethnomusicology

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Ethnomusicologists often consider the production of sound recordings during fieldwork a central activity of the discipline. Scholars including Bruno Nettl and Jaap Kunst have even claimed that the ability to record and play back sound was one of the primary factors that made ethnomusicology possible (Kunst 1959:12; Nettl 1964:16-17). The specific use these scholars envisioned was that upon returning from the field ethnomusicologists would use sound recordings as mnemonic devices to aid in transcription and assorted analytical undertakings during the creation of ethnographic texts.

Once a recording's role as a mere mnemonic device is played out, however, many ethnomusicologists feel it enters a new and troubled stage of existence. While other field materials such as videos and photographs maintain their reputation as valuable information sources, which other scholars might legitimately use, some ethnomusicologists have expressed considerable discomfort over the idea of using others' sound recordings. Alan Merriam dubbed this practice "armchair analysis" and declared it a practice more objectionable than "thinking, speculating, and theorizing from hunches, intuition, or imagination" (1964:38-39). Merriam borrowed this concept from Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas, who complained about "armchair theorists" or those who relied solely upon non-scholarly sources, such as traveler accounts, to bolster inaccurate and often ethnocentric notions. Since these sources were often filled with biases and inaccuracies, both Malinowski and Boas felt they were dangerous substitutions for fieldwork and resulted in highly questionable conclusions.

The purpose of this presentation is not to defend armchair analysis as defined by Malinowski and Boas, an obviously problematic practice and one which can be performed just as easily with non-aural sources, but rather to challenge the assumption that all uses of others' sound recordings should be classified as such. I feel the term "armchair analysis" is inaccurately applied in many cases to devalue perfectly legitimate scholarship, by which I mean research performed with a thorough knowledge of a recording's cultural context and based upon supporting aural and/or textual evidence gathered from members of the originating community, the collector, and other authoritative sources. It is possible to perform accurate and reliable research through "audile analysis," a term I base on Jonathan Sterne's concept of audile technique. In his book, *The Audible Past*, Sterne defines *audile* as a descriptor used both to reference "conditions under which hearing is the privileged sense for knowing or experiencing" and to connote "hearing and listening as developed and specialized practices rather than inherent capacities" (2003:96). Audile analysis, therefore, is a highly skilled and informed process of close listening for the purpose of understanding auditory data and should be central to the scholarly use of sound recordings. Informed listening involves not only a thorough knowledge of audio media along with their quirks and capabilities, but also a deep understanding of a recording's cultural and historical contexts.

In the past when discussing this topic, I've begun by presenting the arguments against the use of audile analysis, giving them center stage (Sewald 2004 and 2005). Today, I'm going to begin instead with the benefits of using sound recordings before addressing these concerns.

First, audile analysis allows us to reassess the work of earlier researchers including their decisions regarding what data to include or exclude from their publications, their personal interview techniques and interactions with informants, and their interpretation and representation

of this information. By performing audile analysis, we can uncover not only biases, mistakes, and slipshod work but also flawlessly executed interview and recording techniques that can serve as models for our own field research and publications and, in terms of pedagogy, those of our students.

Second, sound recordings often contain more information than the original researcher could present within the confines of their academic publications and presentations. It is important to remember that sound recordings contain not only music, but also interviews, oral histories, and other forms of narrative elicited from community members, and this content should be just as central to our research as the digested and reconstituted versions presented by the scholar who collected them. If the original researcher feels a topic is peripheral to his or her work, a wealth of data could be reduced to a single sentence within a publication. With caution, we can use sound recordings in combination with field notes, publications, and/or additional interviews to explore new topics and new theoretical interpretations of the same data.

Third, although there are complaints that sound recordings cut informants from the picture when substituted for live performances, they can arguably restore their presence when used to supplement published texts. The translation of sound into text necessitates an added layer of mediation, the removal of paralinguistic features, and an act of interpretation on the part of the author. A demonstration by the musicians of musical techniques and style will be reduced to mere discussion. A complicated set of individual viewpoints representing different perspectives, disagreements, and contradictions is often reduced to a generalized conclusion about community practices as a whole. Additionally, most informants have at least some control over how they are represented on tape. They seldom have any say as to how they are represented in ethnographic texts. Still, many ethnomusicologists seem paradoxically determined to ban audile analysis,

claiming that it both silences and victimizes informants, while essentializing the reading of articles and ethnographies as an academic necessity.

Fourth, we can use older field recordings as part of feedback interviews to elicit commentary from performers or their descendents. For instance, Daniel Reed was able to track down Sekou Kouyaté, one of the children who performed in a 1934 *Konkoba* mask performance recorded by Laura Boulton. Sekou was able to tell Reed more about both the role of *Konkoba* in the life of the family and the events surrounding the 1934 recording session. Reed was also able to return copies of the recordings to the family, which they found extremely gratifying (2003).

Fifth, older recordings contain information about historic performance events and practices. For instance, some researchers have used recorded interviews and narratives to generate biographies and written historical accounts. Others have used recordings to trace changes in a performer's musical style and repertoire over time, the history of influential recording companies, or the use of music as a form of political or social commentary in relation to a specific chain of historic events.¹

The last benefit of studying sound recordings that I'll mention today is that the recordings themselves often play an important role in human musical behavior. Whether we personally feel recordings are static works, products, or pure artifice, people do create and use them and it is impossible to understand mediated or product-centered musical behavior while ignoring either the product or the medium. Yet ethnomusicologists seem far more interested in what musicians do in the recording studio than in what listeners or the musicians themselves do with the resulting recordings. The field is not devoid of such research, certainly—Peter Manuel's *Cassette Culture* comes to mind—but such works are scarce, seldom assigned in the classroom, and tend to go unmentioned when we discuss ethnomusicological methodologies. More

¹ See Danielson 1997; Racy 1997; Manuel 1993 respectively for examples.

commonly, ethnomusicologists will make passing and frustrating references to their informants' use of sound recordings. For instance, Donald M. Bahr and J. Richard Haefer noted that Piman healers record curing songs which community members can then use in their absence, but they provided no further explication of this phenomenon (1978). By studying how individuals and communities use sound recordings, we can improve our understanding both of how people think about recorded sound as well as the cultural role it plays in a world rife with cassettes, karaoke, iPods, and peer-to-peer file sharing.

Given these six potential benefits, and there are certainly more, why have ethnomusicologists proved so reluctant to accept audile analysis as a legitimate research methodology? While surveying the journal *Ethnomusicology*, I've encountered three primary sets of arguments against the use of audile analysis. I must confess that I have not surveyed these arguments in works published outside of the United States, but work I've published previously on this topic has received favorable responses from researchers representing countries around the world, suggesting that these theoretical challenges to audile analysis are affecting the global community of ethnomusicology as a whole.

Before proceeding, I should clarify that admonitions against the use of audile analysis have seldom, if ever, taken the form of full-fledged articles; rather, the reasons for its rejection generally manifest themselves as asides within works dedicated to other topics. These comments are both brief and widely scattered, and we could perhaps dismiss them if it were not for several considerations. First, the arguments against audile analysis generally appear in introductions to the field and discussions of appropriate ethnomusicological methodologies, both of which are aimed primarily at students. Second, some of those complaining are ethnomusicology's luminaries including Jaap Kunst, Willard Rhodes, Alan Merriam, and Mantle Hood, among

others. Finally, very few works counterbalance these arguments by demonstrating the potential benefits of this methodology.²

Thus the negative attitudes towards audile analysis have failed to coalesce into a well-formed set of arguments open to refutation but rather have remained an elusively insidious undercurrent that is gradually taking its toll on ethnomusicological research and the long-term value of archival field collections. It is critical that we bring these arguments to light for thorough examination so that we may accept, reject, or qualify them—as appropriate—in a thoughtful and scholarly manner.

One of the first arguments raised against the use of audile analysis arose from efforts to define the methodologies and disciplinary boundaries of ethnomusicology. The earliest issues of the SEM Newsletter reveal a quick and thorough conflation of audile analysis, not to mention comparative musicology, with armchair analysis and, as a result, it is now disparaged with little thought as to whether this conflation is either accurate or beneficial. Several introductory textbooks including *The Anthropology of Music* (Merriam 1964), *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction* (Myers 1992), and *Music as Culture* (Herndon and McLeod 1980) have all proclaimed the death of comparative musicology along with the abandonment of the armchair in favor of ethnomusicologists performing fieldwork and gathering their *own* materials for analysis. In *The Anthropology of Music*, Merriam wrote extensively about the value of ethnographic and archaeological approaches and completely rejected the methodology of analyzing recordings made by other researchers. I suspect he was playing devil's advocate, however, because he did exactly this for *Ethnomusicology of the Flathead Indians* (1967).

² For a more detailed discussion of the complaints raised by each of these scholars and of the theoretical arguments raised against the use of audile analysis in general, see Sewald 2004 and 2005.

Since armchair analysis has produced a number of disfavored theories, most notably cultural evolutionism, the conflation of audile analysis with armchair analysis can lead to its direct association with these theories. Christopher Marshall has even stated that the existence of field recordings was the very thing that made the theory of cultural evolutionism possible (1972:140). The problem with this association is that it denies both researcher responsibility and the existence of these theories independent from audile analysis. It seems strange to condemn sound recordings—a medium that actually allows performers some control and negotiation during their creation—as a source of ethnocentric and imperialistic theories without impugning text as the medium that allowed for their expression.

As the development of the field progressed, audile analysis was caught up in the internal struggle between musicologists and anthropologists to demarcate the boundaries of the field. For better or worse, several of the founders of the Society for Ethnomusicology were aggressive in establishing anthropological methodologies and challenged many of the applications that sound recordings seem most obviously suited for, such as the creation of musical transcriptions and historical studies. Such pursuits were rejected as the work of historical and systematic musicologists whereas ethnomusicologists were expected to produce ethnographic texts treating current performance practices. There was also a movement, spearheaded by Merriam, to redefine “music” as a cultural *process* (Merriam 1963:211). Although music remained the central study object of the discipline, its meaning shifted to refer to interactive human behavior. Some scholars have even argued that “music” has little to do with the “musical sounds” or “fixed works” captured by sound recordings. Although I agree that sound recordings are “things” as opposed to processes or behaviors, they can still contain information about human musical behavior and, like other culture objects, their use entails behavior. We simply must remember

that sound recordings play only one part in the larger picture and can seldom be studied in isolation from other information sources.

Another set of arguments against the use of audile analysis stems from concerns regarding the technical challenges faced while using sound recordings. A small degree of skepticism is healthy when evaluating the accuracy and reliability of any source be it a sound recording, a clip on YouTube, an ethnographic text, or our initial reactions to a performance. Less healthy are suggestions that audile analysis should be rejected due to the mere existence of technical obstacles. For instance, some ethnomusicologists have warned that secondary researchers can accidentally transcribe hum as drone or the thumping of a cylinder crack as drumbeats—and yet both mistakes are easily avoidable if we are familiar with the sonic quirks of tape and wax (Ellingson 1992:132; Roberts and Thompson 1963:5). Bruce Jackson complained that the speed of many older recordings is unreliable, which is true enough, but he also argued that this problem renders the use of recordings into a guessing game (1987:125). Obviously the inability to determine the speed of a recording can be a barrier to musical transcription, but it would offer little hindrance to a thematic analysis of song lyrics or to the intelligibility of an interview.

Other researchers have voiced the blatant double-standard that sound recordings fail to capture synesthetic details such as sight or smell. If we reject sound recordings for this reason, shouldn't we also reject a book on South Indian music if it fails to capture the smell of local cooking or the feel of humidity in Madras?³ Ethnographic texts do not capture these details and furthermore fail to capture the sonic aspects of a performance. Even film offers only an impression of visual details and its very two-dimensionality makes it suspect for detailed kinesthetic analysis. Instead of singling out sound recordings for rejection, it behooves us to

³ For one example, see Hood 1971:33.

develop a framework both for evaluating the accuracy and reliability of documents across formats and for recognizing the problem of misleading technical artifacts and distortions inherent in all multimedia recordings. Such frameworks are already in place for the interpretation and application of academic texts but are sorely lacking in the case of other media, especially for sound recordings.⁴

The third set of arguments against the use of audile analysis is that sound recordings have been detached from the original event or “decontextualized.” Other ways of describing this process are more pejorative and include reification, freezing, canning, and—my personal favorite—embalming. Again, some of the expectations placed upon sound recordings reveal a double-standard. The absence of information that was easily obtainable during the original event, the lack of multiple perspectives, the inability to record people’s thoughts directly are all problems that equally exist for films, ethnographic texts, and the human memory. We cannot capture and perfectly reconstitute reality with any one medium nor a combination of media. So again, why single out sound recordings for rejection?

Other concerns regarding context are more legitimate. How do we tell if a sound recording accurately represents a performance tradition or an individual performance? How does one piece together the sonic content of a recording with its original historical, political, and/or cultural context? If a person is interested in the entirety of the performance event and a sound recording contains only songs, how is it useful? The solution to resolving many of these concerns for lost context may be simple. In some cases researchers will belong to the originating community and they may have a better understanding of the recorded event than the original collector. In cases where the researcher is not a community member, fruitful audile analysis may still be possible. In the past, the scholars who have challenged the use of audile analysis have often implied an

⁴ Consider, for instance, Gertz’s *Works and Lives* (1988).

“either or model.” Either one goes out to the field and performs fieldwork or one sits at home and listens to field recordings. But must sound recordings be analyzed in isolation from other information sources? Even if one feels that ethnographic research is impossible without field research, there is absolutely no reason why a researcher could not combine both fieldwork and audile analysis.

Additionally, accepting that sound recordings are highly valuable historic documents does not mean that we have to use them for every research project. We should certainly consider them if they exist but, as with any other medium, there will be times when existent recordings will be unsuitable to our current research questions. They may also prove difficult to authenticate in the archival sense or to access due to restrictive intellectual property rights, inadequate documentation, or poorly recorded sonic content. Instead of rejecting sound recordings simply because they are sound recordings, we should instead determine their value to our research based on an evaluation of the condition and nature of content of the recordings at hand.

And now we come to the question of why we should care if ethnomusicologists accept audile analysis as a legitimate research methodology. First, without audile analysis we lose many of the benefits mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Second, the idea that sound recordings are only valuable to the original researcher as a mnemonic device can result in a harmful malaise. Take, for example, this quotation from Bruce Jackson’s instructional text *Fieldwork*:

Make the best tape you can manage to make, but don’t feel guilty if you fail to provide all the nourishment a theoretical consumer might desire. This work is taking place in the practical world. Practically, every field tape might find extensive and unexpected utilization; practically, you can afford only so much precision. Know what you’re doing, know what you might do, do as good a job as you can with the resources you have at your disposal. Then “the people who come after” can do their own work and solve their own problems. (1987:141)

Although his point about practical limitations is well taken, Jackson's lack of concern toward the future use of sound recordings is troubling. It disregards that "the people who come after" could well include our own informants or their descendents. Such a flippant attitude may also encourage researchers to be negligent in resolving issues of intellectual property rights, providing at least a minimal amount of descriptive metadata, storing their materials in appropriate climate conditions, and arranging for their eventual archival deposit or—in the case of sensitive materials—destruction. If it is assumed that no one will want to use, should use, or could use audio materials except the original researcher, it may be difficult to justify devoting time and resources to what are deemed unimportant matters. The content of recordings receiving such neglect can quickly become inaccessible and even the original collector is not immune from the degradation of audio carriers and his or her own memory.

Finally, this malaise seems to be causing a breakdown in citation practices. While books and articles almost always receive full citations in the bibliography, sound recordings—when actually cited—are often relegated to partial citations in footnotes, parenthetical notations, or mere passing references. These references can be incredibly vague. Dalia Cohen and Ruth Katz mentioned using a large number of recordings from the Israel Broadcasting Service (1960:68). Claude Charron referred to a corpus of 900 songs from the Belcher Islands (1978). Richard Keeling drew from a "broad musical corpus including historical recordings" from 1902 to 1975 (1985:208). Other common trends include citing liner notes but not the recording itself, providing just the company name and catalog number, or including transcriptions without mentioning the aural source. Imagine reactions if similar practices were used for written sources! Would scholars accept these equivalents for books and articles? Such poor references not only make it next to impossible for future researchers to access these recordings, they also

make it difficult for those who have discovered our archived field collections to locate our relevant publications.

There are now 117-years worth of ethnographic sound recordings in our vaults. It is time that we learn how to use these valuable resources and put them in their proper place among our other information sources. If we can draw upon ethnographies, photographs, videos, pamphlets, newspapers, and novels to gain a historic perspective on musical behavior, there is nothing to stop us from using sound recordings other than our current theoretical weaknesses, our self-imposed dependence on textual and visual media, and our fear of the stigmas that currently riddle the literature of our discipline.

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